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ABSTRACT

The reasons for the phenomenon of guaranteed graduation are considered, as are criticisms of this approach. Guaranteed graduation programs have resulted in part as a result of an attempt to address issues and concerns about the cost of a college education, articulation of coursework, time to degree, and competency. While guarantees are designed to promote retention and tracking of students, they also specify students' responsibilities to fulfill program requirements, promising free or fixed tuition if the university fails to provide courses needed for the degree. This approach is also effective in marketing and recruitment. Criticisms concern whether guarantee programs are necessary and whether part-time and transfer students are eligible to participate. The guarantee phenomenon may be directed especially toward public higher education institutions, which have lower undergraduate completion rates than do private institutions. Guarantee programs have been developed in response to pressures from state legislators, parents, and taxpayers; some of the universities and states which have adopted this practice are identified. Students must be fully informed before signing a contract of expectations and responsibilities in terms of a guarantee, and the institution must be aware of implications of guarantees, such as providing courses, curriculum requirements, and issues of advising. (SW)

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Graduation Guarantees: Contracting for Success or Failure?

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The public, and particularly its representatives of legislative action, are seeking better performance outcomes from higher education. Although strongly committed to maintaining access to opportunity, increasingly the cost of the education and the time needed to complete the requirements are being challenged. These and other forces of change have recently been articulated in a *Policy Perspective* supported by the Ford Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trust (November 1996, Vol. 7:1). An accommodation that addresses these concerns is a new phenomenon of guaranteed program delivery. Guarantees attempt to address issues and concerns including cost of a college education, articulation of coursework, time to degree, and competency. These guarantees typically are designed to promote retention and efficient tracking of students. Also, these guarantees specify student responsibility with a promise of free or fixed tuition if the university fails to provide the courses of the agreed to degree plan.

A satisfied public is not going to find advantage in the pronouncement of guarantees that have little real value. Guarantees that are designed simply as marketing devices will soon be discounted by customers looking for performance rather than "pomp and circumstance." Does one buy a new car simply for its style or rather for its guarantee of service?

Is it not reasonable for college enrollees to inquire how long it will take to satisfy the requirements? Or, "What will my education cost?" Or, "Are there any responsibilities that I must fulfill to satisfy the requirements of the program I plan to select?" Or, "Can a guarantee improve my chance of program completion?" In a learning environment where the customer is taken for granted perhaps too little attention is placed on answering such questions. However, we live in a time where the importance of customer satisfaction has become uppermost. At the same time, we are increasingly attracted to outcomes that are proven to be guaranteed by the provider of a service or product.

Colleges and universities have long specified expectations for a required grade point average, a minimum number of credit hours of study, and specified course categories or course content as answers to such questions. In the past, colleges and universities were not too concerned about total costs, or how long it would take to graduate, since students were seen as consumers of courses rather than of programs. The evidence also is persuasive in demonstrating higher education's lack of concern for persons who drop out of school. Indeed, how many persons reading this essay have ever heard a professor say, "Look around, one of three of you will survive to graduation."? Quality was measured by the elimination of the less successful rather than by measures of successful degree completions.

It is in this context of consumer concern that guarantees were born. Additionally, graduation guarantees appear to address a public rather than a private university problem, as evidenced by data showing that 95 percent of private college students finish their degrees in four years, compared to the fewer than 50 percent of public university students who do so. Clearly, faculty, advisors, and administrators at public institutions need to identify innovative strategies for attempting to address the enormous gap in four-year graduation rates. At first glance, guarantees appear to be one such attempt at increasing the percentage of students at public universities who finish a degree within four years.

While still a relatively new phenomenon, guarantees are raising concerns for many educators. At the 1996 National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Conference held in Washington D.C., six panelists, all

former NACADA presidents, discussed the feasibility and applicability of graduation guarantees at public and private collegiate institutions. A number of concerns were raised about the rationale behind graduation guarantees. The tone of the questions clearly placed these concerns on the side of the provider rather than of the consumer. For example:

- ◊ Why are colleges and universities developing graduation guarantees?
- ◊ Are these programs necessary?
- ◊ Are these programs fair?
- ◊ Are all students eligible to participate?
- ◊ Do guarantees allow students to engage in extracurricular activities?

Depending on one's viewpoint or perspective, the generally negative response of the panelists seemed to emphasize the viewpoint that guarantees were nothing more than a recruitment or marketing tool and should be scrutinized from that perspective. Are questions of institutional integrity, program quality, and honesty of advertisement being raised by these guarantees? Some persons spoke to the seeming preferential treatment being suggested for participants capable of taking advantage of the guarantee. Concern was expressed that part-time students, transfer students, or students with weak entry skills would be excluded from participation. Given the NACADA audience, it is not surprising that advisors saw the guarantees from a viewpoint of advisor accountability in helping students succeed, while faculty and others were seen as being held less accountable for ensuring avoidance of the need of fulfilling a given guarantee. The panelists argued that graduation guarantees would have serious implications for general education requirements, would place an overemphasis on introductory courses, would impose restrictions on faculty advising, and would have potential legal implications.

Despite the number of criticisms made by the NACADA panelists concerning the feasibility of graduation guarantees, one cannot so easily conclude that guarantees are without merit. A visit to the Internet on the World Wide Web shows that universities across the nation are taking steps to develop and adopt graduation guarantees. Indiana University at Bloomington has developed a program referred to as "GRADPACT," which promises to pay tuition for additional semesters if students are unable to finish their undergraduate degree in four years. The Iowa Board of Regents mandated in 1995 that all major institutions in the state should adopt graduation guarantees that promote four-year degree completions for college students. The University of Northern Iowa reported that 52 percent of incoming students signed up for the guarantee last year. Other schools, such as Moorhead State University, Wittenberg University, University of the Pacific, and Winona State University, also have developed four-year graduation plans. While it is true that schools have developed guarantee programs in response to pressures from state legislators, parents, and taxpayers, and that these programs do serve as an effective marketing and recruitment strategy, these institutions also believe they are helping meet the demands of students who want to finish their degree within a four-year time span. Given the current public scrutiny of public institutional success, the guarantee phenomenon needs to be particularly directed toward this educational sector. The adoption and successful implementation of four-year graduation guarantees may be one of the first innovative solutions to allow public institutions of higher education to attempt to accomplish this important goal.

Graduation guarantees *are* important, because they are an integral aspect of timely degree completion. Students who linger in college, for six, seven, eight, or possibly even more years, are denying themselves employment or career opportunities that could improve their lifestyles substantially. Legislatures in some states, such as California, Florida, North Carolina, and Utah, have passed legislation that requires college students to pay the full rate of tuition once they have completed a designated number of credit hours beyond those required for graduation. If a college requires students to complete 120 semester hours to graduate, for example, that school may begin charging its students the full rate of tuition once they have earned more than 140-150 hours, to discourage them from spending additional time in college. Although similar initiatives have been proposed in states such as Colorado, they have been met in the legislatures with harsh criticisms from college officials who believe that such initiatives will discourage students from attending state schools (Gorman, 1996, A27).

While it is true that a four-year graduation guarantee is not for every student, one need only recognize that the same is true for university honors programs that restrict membership because of academic or grade point requirements. One would not argue that we should eliminate the honors program simply because some students are not eligible to participate in it. In reality, this is what makes the honors program experience unique or special—it is only for students with good academic records or experience. Even organizations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) restrict the number of semesters of eligibility for student athletes. In a similar vein, one can make the case that graduation guarantees are only for those students who are committed to finishing their undergraduate degrees in four years or less.

For guarantees to work effectively, students must be fully informed before signing a contract of expectations and responsibilities in terms of a guarantee. The higher education institution must be fully aware of the potential implications of a guarantee delivery, such as providing courses, curriculum requirements, issues of advising, etc. Universities also must have in place a tracking mechanism that provides for dealing with the extra parameters that define the guarantee student at each stage of the degree program. Clarity of purpose also is necessary. The philosophical belief of the guarantee must be more than just a simple marketing tool—it must be able to meet and accommodate the needs and provide specific advantage to students choosing to be part of a guarantee plan.

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